

Quest : The Weak

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Summary: Takes place a few years before TPM - An archaeologist expedition goes in search of a lost civilization on Naboo with a very familiar gungan guide. Humor, danger, and mystery collide.

1. Quest: The Weak

Quest

****part 1****

****The Weak****

>
 This has absolutely nothing to do with my regular series. It is a off-the-wall plotline (which made it all the more fun because no-one was expecting it! :) Jar Jar and the Gungan race - except the one I created -- belongs to George Lucas. The rest belong to me.

>
 He stepped out of the ship and breathed the cool air of the morning. Even amidst the smell of oil and metal from the surrounding machinery, he smelled mist and pure water. He loved Naboo. Ever since he'd visited here as a boy, he'd been gripped with the urge to stay forever. But then, Hali Jonareh had not had the means to come back. Any opportunity that showed itself through the cracks during his childhood had been eliminated when he became a man, struggling to find something to do with his life. He had chosen solar archaeology, a career and academy major that took him far beyond his home planet, Coruscant. He loved every minute away from home, especially now that he was **here**.

>
 Hali was hailed by a pilot stepping over with others in tow - humans and a Gungan. The pilot beckoned the group to start carrying equipment out of the ship's cargo hold. They'd been expecting Hali an hour later, but his droid, O3T (snobbish as it was smart) had charted a shortcut that saved them more time.

>
 "Hey watch it, Gungan!" one of the crew members yelled as the alien nearly dropped his end of the heavy wooden chest on a man's

foot.

>
 "Sowwy, sowwy," the creature muttered and struggled to lift the chest as high as the other man was. Hali observed how thin and scrawny-looking the Gungan was. It was younger than any of the men and meeker than the legendary race of warriors he had expected. He couldn't even imagine this Gungan as a footsoldier.

>
 "That's only Jar Jar. Comes here ever so often either to muck around with humans or to do some jobs," the pilot said, seeing Hali at his observation. "So, is the rest of your crew hiding or still asleep?"

>
 "Oh," said Hali, embarrassed. "I hope it isn't that droid again. Please just wait one minute!"

>
 Hali walked quickly up the rampart and sure enough, O3T was responsible for his crew's delay.

>
 "Master Jonareh has not given you permission to depart from the ship," the droid stated.

>
 "Let us through, dammit! Before I rip out your circuits and tie them around your head!" a young woman was yelling at the droid. Behind her waited four other impatient crew members.

>
 "Master Jonareh has not given you permission to rip out my circuits and tie them around my head," the droid stated in reply.

>
 "Just walk past him, Alexis, what's he gonna do? Beep us to death?"

>
 The young man who had spoken attempted to pass the droid only to receive a zap in the stomach.

>
 "I repeat, Master Jonareh has not given you permission --"

>
 "O3T, that's enough," said Hali. "I give you my permission to leave the ship."

>
 "Thank you, Master Jonareh," said the droid, beginning to wheel down the rampart. "Yeah, 'Master Jonareh', thanks alot," muttered the young man following the droid. "Kad, it's not Hali's fault that O3T has his circuits shoved up the wrong input," Alexis admonished.

>
 Kad rolled his eyes but nodded an apology to Jonareh as he passed him. Hali sighed inaudibly. Kad had been sullen to the point of being disrespectful since the day he met him. He wondered why he'd let Kad be a part of the team, then dismissed it. Kad's career was clean, so there was no reason to kick him off for a mere attitude problem. There was, however, a certain air about him that made Hali uneasy.

>
 "Excuse me," Kad snapped shoving past the Gungan, Jar Jar.

>
 "How wude," muttered Jar Jar.

>
 "I *said* 'excuse me', what more do you want?" Kad growled. In one of his dark moods again, I see, Hali thought disapprovingly. Jar Jar did not meet Kad's eyes. He meekly walked to the ship to help unload the rest of the field equipment.

>
 "Hedo," he said to Alexis who was busy writing something into her data pad. He peered curiously at the device she held in her hands.

>
 "Yeah, what can I do for --" Alexis stopped when she looked up and saw Jar Jar for the first time. "Whoa, what are you?"

>
 Jar Jar gave a snort of surprise and indignance. First he'd been snapped at, now he was being studied like a zoo animal. "Mesa called Ja Ja Binks. My is not a *thing*," he said in an offended tone. He bent to pick up a box, then walked away not looking back. Alexis was dumbfounded.

>
 "Whoa, wait, I didn't mean--"

>
 "Let him go, miss," said the same pilot who had first talked to Hali. "He's a bit sensitive. He'll get over it."

>
 "What is he? I've never seen his race before."

>
 Hali smiled. Alexis had never come to Naboo in her life. She had yet to learn about the different species across the galaxies - so far she'd just started in on this profession. In fact, she wouldn't be here at all if her father had not fallen ill and asked her to take his place and record pictures of any findings.

>
 The first archaeological team sent to the Keyla Gunga Temple ruins had never reported back to base. They'd been found scattered a few years later, but were reluctant to state all that had befallen them and broken them up. Each one had different stories - no one account matched up with another. The warning they'd all given was mutual, however: don't go into that area . . . don't search for that place . . . or if you have to search for it, don't find it.

>
 "He's a Gungan. They're native to this planet. It's debated over whether they were here before humans colonized Naboo."

>
 "So he must know where --" Alexis was cut off as Hali squeezed her arm gently, reminding her not to say their destination out loud. Before the pilot could ask what she was about to say, Hali took him aside.

>
 "Do you think you can convince Jar Jar to be our guide? We need to travel through the swamp to do a recorded document on the peko peko. He may know some fine nesting places and how to steer clear of swamp predators. I remember those Vermonk rather too well for my taste."

>
 "Well, I think Jar Jar's a bit scrawny to defend you against Vermonks," laughed the pilot. Hali didn't laugh. The pilot cleared his throat, self-consciously. "You may want to ask him yourself. Jar Jar doesn't know me all that well. I just know more about him from the others. They asked him why he doesn't hang out with his own kind," the pilot said, lowering his voice, although there was no need to because of the clanging machinery and shouts of men all around, "And he said he was banished. Didn't say why. We all have our own theories. Most likely he killed someone by accident - that kid's a deadly jinx with just about any job you give him. Even washing windows isn't safe for him. I remember one time --"

>
 "Thank you for your help, sir. I'll talk to him," Hali said, cutting the pilot off. He was starting to dislike the man. As a boy he'd always admired Gungans, even though he'd only seen them from a distance or in the illustrations of storybooks. This one, Jar Jar, weak or thin or clumsy as he was, was no less deserving of his respect.

>
 Hali walked toward where he'd last seen Jar Jar. A resounding crash led him right to the Gungan who was now pitifully trying to explain that he didn't mean to drop the heavy crate on the spare windshield but was not able to get a word through since another pilot was yelling curses at him. Hali put himself between the two before the scene got ugly.

>
 "Can we talk for a moment?" Hali asked Jar Jar.

>
 "Mesa?"

>
 "Yes. Let's go over here." They walked briskly away from the whole scenario and when they were at a safe distance, Jar Jar sighed in relief.

>
 "Hey, tanks. Yous hepped me outta one bery sticky sichu-asion."

>
 "Don't mention it. I need your help."

>
 "Wha? Yous got mur stuff in dat ship dat wesa gotta carry somewhere?"

>
 "No, that's not what I mean. We're going into the swamps of

Keyla. Could you be our guide?"

>
 "My heard lotsa spooki-tales about dat place . . . uh . . . ohhh, my not know . . . " muttered Jar Jar uneasily. His stomach rumbled and he grimaced in pain. Hali looked concerned.

>
 "When have you last eaten? You look half-starved."

>
 "Yesterday mornin'."

>
 "Yester --?! That's about twenty-eight hours without food, Jar Jar, and you're doing heavy labor besides. Why aren't they feeding you?"

>
 "My was sick . . . berry sick not too long-ago. Couldn survive on me own an, my couldn' go back ta Otah Gunga. Dey do bad tings ta my if my returnin der. So my walked here, to dis spaceport. Nearly died hersa too. Got thin. Weak. Couldn' keep anyting solid down - only watta. Da pilots took my to da hospital an my stay der till I get betta - like now. Dey nice, but dey not feedin mesa for free here. My gotta earn. Lately, my be causin too much trubble and havin axi-dents wit da machinery. Dey not be happy wit mesa, nossir."

>
 "So the damage is taken out of your wages when you make mistakes, and then, you can't pay for food?"

>
 "Uh-huh."

>
 "I would be willing to pay you to be our guide."

>
 "Pay mesa?"

>
 "Yes."

>
 "Dat sounds berry berry good . . . although dat place is cursed . . . but I got no money an no food . . ." Jar Jar was struggling with the choice. His stomach cramped again painfully and he made up his mind. "My take da job. Der's gonna be bombad trubbles ahead . . . my jus warnin yous."

>
 "You may leave at the first sign of danger."

>
 "Wha? I not strandin yousa if yousa bein in trubble! What kinda guide would dat be?"

>
 Hali smiled. "Then you'll stay with us the whole way no matter what?"

>
 "Yep. As long as yousa promise not ta do anyting stupiddens."

>
 "I think I can promise you that."

>
 "Deal, then." Jar Jar held out his greasy hand. "Oops." He grinned and wiped it off on his trousers. "Here," he said, offering his hand again, which didn't look all that much cleaner. Unable to surpress an amused grin, Hali shook it anyway.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

> Alexis walked alongside the Gungan in silence. She wondered at his appearance and how he lived and was full of questions to ask.

However, she'd already insulted him once. "Uh . . . look, Jar Jar?"

> "Yes?"

> He didn't seem to be still angry at her. That was a good sign. "I'm sorry if I offended you. It's just that I've never seen a member of your race before. You're the first I've met."

> "Rilly? My thought yousa were one of da Naboo humons. So, yous nevva been here?"

> "No." Alexis was relieved they were having a decent conversation. "This is my first visit. My father is an archaeologist, but he couldn't make it for the expedition. So he sent me."

> "Spake wat? Yur father is a . . . archi-olo-wat?" Jar Jar grinned sheepishly, unable to repeat what she had said.

> Before Alexis could answer, O3T chimed in. "Archaeologist -- a career that consists of determining the origin of races within and without the galaxy, discovering lost treasures and ruins of ancient

civilizations--"

> "Thank you O3T, that's quite enough," Alexis said, humorlessly. But the droid didn't stop there.

> "--documenting different animate and inanimate objects native to planets within or without the galaxy," O3T droned on. "Determining the lifestyles and--"

> "Would you kindly shut up?"

> "--culture of otherwise forgotten civilizations --"

> "Lemme rephrase that. Either shut up or learn how to swim."

> O3T shut up with a series of beeps and rolled ahead to study some plant life. Jar Jar giggled. Alexis looked at him in amusement.

> "What? You think that was funny?" she asked with a smile.

> "Mooie mooie!" Jar Jar coughed to mask his laughter when Kad turned around to look at him sideways. Jar grinned back sheepishly. Kad rolled his eyes and continued on.

> Alexis was also having trouble keeping a straight face.

> "Well, I meant it. O3T is the most annoying, stuck up tin bucket that ever existed."

> "Ah well. Mebbe it turn out we be needin his, eh? Whosa knows?"

> "Need him for what? A dictionary on wheels is hardly something we can depend on in this place. If one of those Vermonks attacked, he'd probably just sit there and state the thing's scientific name."

> Jar Jar burst out laughing again, and this time, Alexis joined him. They walked on, oblivious to the brooding mist swirling behind them, blocking any view of the way out.

* * *

> Dinner that night was delicious as Jar Jar stated, licking his fingers. He looked much better than when they had started out, Hali observed. He was less pale and his eyes were bright with curiosity at the equipment the team had brought with them. Even now he was up and poking about.

> "Whatsa dis?" Jar asked, reaching out to touch the device in Kad's hand.

> "You are really getting annoying," Kad muttered, but he explained to Jar Jar anyway that it was a hand-held chemical-tracer and that he was using it to see if there was anything that may help point the way to the Keyla Gunga Temple.

> "Huh. Weirdin. Why yousa hire me if dat ting ken show yous da way?"

> "Good question," snapped Kad. "But I guess Hali doesn't trust machinery as much as I do. You're kinda the backup plan in case something or someone trashes our equipment."

>
 "Why woud anybotty do dat?"

>
 "You said this place was haunted. Whether or not by spooks, we may not be alone here. Whatever caused the other teams to fail may still be around waiting for us."

>
 Jar Jar gulped. "I-I tink I'm gonna go talk wit Mista Hali for a whiles. Bui."

>
 "See ya 'round," Kad muttered, his mind set on the device in front of him.

>
 Hali Jonareh looked up from his keypad as Jar Jar sat next to him. "Hedo."

>
 "Something troubling you?" Hali asked, noticing Jar's expression.

>
 "Oh, nuttin. Nuttin atall, nossir."
>
 "You look like you have a million questions to ask me," Hali spoke, as he resumed typing into his keypad.
>
 "Jus one fer now. Wesa gonna get outta dis alive you tink?"

>
 "What do you mean by that?"
>
 "Wellasee, Kad tink's der's somet'in afta us. An my 'fraid he's right."
>
 They were silent for a moment. Hali switched off his keypad.
"You can leave, you know. If you like."
>
 Jar Jar refused at once. "My promis-ed!" he said indignantly. He had already told Hali that he wouldn't strand them on his honor. _Didn't this man believe him? Was he acting cowardly?_ Jar Jar gave a small sigh of frustration. _What was wrong with him? Gungans were supposed to be fearless warriors._
>
 As if sensing his distress, Hali smiled and put a hand on Jar Jar's shoulder. "Listen, friend. You are not obliged to do anything you don't want to do. If there's danger, then there's no need for you to sacrifice your life for our task. If things should get out of hand, then go."
>
 Jar Jar shook his head, his ears swiveling with the motion. "Nah-uh. My not leavin yous."
>
 "May I ask why the sudden change of attitude?"
>
 The Gungan was silent for a while, then he spoke with his amber-gold eyes averted toward the ground. "Cause yousa be needin me. An . . . well . . . no-one needen Ja Ja Binks. Evva. Dis bein probbly da first time sombotty ask fer my hep. Mebbe even da las time. If my leave now . . . my nevva gonna fo'give meself for not stayin with yous. Yous be treatin mesa wit a lotta respect dat my normally no be gettin. My sooner not be throwin all dat 'way by runnin. Sowwy if dat's not a goot ansa, but dat's wat Ja Ja be feelin right-about-nows."
>
 Hali looked down upon the young Gungan who sat with his arms hugging his knees to his chest. It was a position that seemed to suggest loneliness and rejection had played major roles in Jar Jar's life. "There is no good or bad answer to that question, Jar Jar. I wanted the truth and you gave it to me. Thank you for helping us," Hali said gently.
>
 "Tanks fer askin," was the soft reply.
>
 "The sun will set in just an hour. I suggest we get ready to turn in."
>
 "Keday . . . ah, Hali sir? It be wise ta set up watchin person about dese parts. In case somet'in _is_ afta us."
>
 "That may be a good idea," agreed Hali.
>
 "My not tired yet," Jar Jar offered.
>
 "Are you sure?" The Gungan nodded. "Allright. You have first watch. Kad will relieve you."
>
 "Sounds goot ta mesa." Jar Jar got up and stretched his lanky body. Hali watched him walk away with a sad, distant smile and turned back to his keypad.
> <div class="center">* * *</div>
> Alexis couldn't, for the life of her, get to sleep. She was just too eager to wait until morning. While the others around her grumbled or snored in sleep, she lay with her eyes wide open, gazing up at the sky. Away from any artificial light, the stars blanketed the sky and the crescent moon gave a ghost-like glow to the plant life surrounding the camp. Alexis heard a soft tuneless humming coming from one end of the camp. She sat up and kicked the covers off her legs and feet.

> The cold on her flesh startled her and she almost grabbed the

covers back up for warmth. But she forced herself to stand up and walk toward the sound. If she thought the swamp air was chilly, it was nothing compared to how icy the ground was beneath her bare feet. She winced as she felt her feet get numb from the cold. If she stepped on a sharp rock at this point, she wouldn't notice.

> A figure was bent over something and singing softly. It sang in a language Alexis didn't understand and had never heard before. Goosebumps ran along her arms and legs. She picked up a branch to use as a weapon in case the form before her belonged to a would-be menace. She stepped forward as if in a dream, the branch raised like a club. Abruptly, she stepped on a twig and its crack seemed to reverberate throughout the swamp.

> The figure leapt up and spun around. Alexis gasped, startled, threw the branch up in the air and ducked to the ground with her hands over her head, trembling all over. She would be disgusted at her behavior later on, but at the moment, her heart was racing and she was afraid.

> "Yousa okeday, Lexi?"

> Alexis opened one eye and looked up. Jar Jar stood over her. She could make out his gold eyes reflecting the light of the moon above. "Jar Jar, you scared the hell out of me," she confessed, getting up, unsteadily. Her feet were completely numb and due to this, they felt like lead weights.

> "Huh?" Jar Jar was confused. How could he have frightened her so badly? He hadn't done anything.

> "Actually, I think I scared the hell outta myself. I thought you were a -"

> "Ghostie? Heh, no. Mesa Ja Ja, an everytin okeday now."

> Alexis smiled, her hand across her chest, feeling her heart slow down into its normal rate. "I guess I just have an overactive imagination."

> "Dat's one ob my problems too. Always tinkin sometin bad afta my."

> Jar Jar showed her what he had been doing. Two large mussels were all clean of mud. All that was left was to pry them open and scoop out the meat. "Dis is braikfast fer tomorrow. Shoud keep dem alive until yous gonna eat dem, othawise, dey taste not-so-good," he explained. "Mussels plenty bouts dis place. We nevva gonna run outta food as long as Ja Ja bein around."

> Alexis reached out to touch one of the mussels and upon doing so, pulled her hand back quickly. "Yick. They're shiny and smooth in the light, but when I touched it . . . it's hard and coarse. How do they look inside?"

> "Like um . . . well . . . der's a bunch ob really soft white stuff and dat's da meat. Tis where der vulnerable. Yous gotta be careful when dey open an live, though. Gotta hold open tight, or dey snap your tongue . . . ouchie . . ."

> Alexis grinned. "I can just imagine you with one of these things hanging off your tongue."

> "Nuh-uh! Dat no gonna happen ta mesa eber again!" Jar Jar said, shaking his head vigorously.

> With a giggle, Alexis tilted her head back and looked up at the sky again. "It sure must be beautiful to live out here."

> "Yeah. 'Scept when you haf to." Alexis looked over at Jar Jar in surprise. "If my coud go back home, den mebbe mesa be enjoyin dis place mur often. Tis beautiful, tho, sur."

> "I'm sorry. I forgot you were banished," Alexis murmured.

> Jar Jar shrugged nonchalantly. "Made a few stoopid mistakes. Da Bosses, dey get mad and sent me 'way."

> Alexis and Jar Jar were silent for a while. "You know," said

Alexis, "I'm kinda banished too."

> "Rilly?"

> Alexis nodded. "My father sent me here to keep me occupied. He isn't ill. That's just pretense. I know because he's been ill whenever he and I were to go someplace together. He doesn't want me around."

> "But Hali spaked --"

> "Hali told you and the others what I told him. What I told him isn't the truth. It's a lie to make the truth less obvious."

> Jar Jar cocked his head and looked at Alexis who was still gazing at the stars. "He walked out on Mom and me before I could walk. Said he loved us, but his work was too important to be dragged down by a kid and wife. And that his job was risky and he couldn't support us. Said he was doing a favor by walking out on us. Don't get me wrong, my dad is a great man. Just not a great father. When Mom died, I went to live with him. He always promised me we'd do fun things and he'd talk with me more often, but I rarely saw him unless I got up before dawn or stayed up till after midnight. Even then, he was busy with his work. I wanted to help him, but he never let me. I read his books and he taught me some things, but he never really talked to me like I was his daughter. It was more like I was a kid just hanging around his house like a charity case. He sent me here because he sensed how I was growing up. This expedition wasn't important to him anyway. He said he had other stuff to do. I just don't know what's with him anymore."

> "Are yous gonna go back?" Jar Jar asked, quietly.

> "Maybe, if just to give him his documents and say good bye."

> "Yous coud stay here in Naboo."

> "Really? Think I'd have any chance of surviving these swamps?"

Alexis jested. Jar Jar perked up. Would she possibly be interested in staying with him?

> "If mesa ken do it, so ken yous. We bein less lonely if wesan tagetha, Lexi," he said eagerly.

> "No. I . . . I'm too much of a city girl to ever live out here. I appreciate the offer, but as cool as this place is to hike in, I can't possibly live here."

> "In da city den?" Jar Jar was still hopeful.

> Alexis heard now what Jar Jar was really asking. "Jar Jar, wherever I go, I will come back to visit you. I promise."

> Jar Jar blinked. How do women do that? he wondered. He grinned. "Yous rilly come backie all dis way for me?"

>
 "Sure. I better get back to bed. I get grumpy when I don't sleep much."

>
 "My be sleepin too pritty soon. Kad takes da next watch."

>
 "Well then, I'll meet you in dreams for now, I guess." Alexis patted his shoulder. "Good night. Oh, and about calling me Lexi . . ."

>
 Jar Jar started. "My won't if yous don wan mesa too."

>
 "No no, please do. My mom used to call me that. It's nice to hear again."

>
 "Kay. G'nightie."

>
 Alexis padded off, the mist filling the place where she had sat beside him. Jar Jar wondered uneasily if it was an omen.

>

* * *

> "Time to awaken," droned O3T. Jar Jar groaned, refusing to emerge from beneath his blanket.

> "Huh? Sun up?" he muttered, groggily.

> "This planetary system's sun is not yet above the horizon."

> "Ohhh, den lemme 'lone. Go an documen plant tings or somfin." Jar Jar rolled over on his stomach and stuffed his head under his pillow, effectively drowning out O3T's reply.

> "Very well. Documenting Gungan life form of planet Naboo. Dowloading first preliminary blood sample." O3T extended one of its appendages toward Jar Jar's sleeping body. The end had a needle attached to it. Jar Jar's arm was out from underneath the blanket so the droid without a second's hesitation stuck the needle into Jar Jar's flesh. The results were extraordinary. "Hey, wat yous - OWWWW!!" Jar Jar yanked his arm away. The needle came with it. Alarmed, O3T rolled back a few feet. Jar Jar sat up and scuttled backwards from the droid, glaring at it fiercely.

> "What's going on?" demanded Alexis, awakened by Jar Jar's cries.

> Breathlessly, Jar Jar pointed at the droid then, with a small whimper, presented his arm to Alexis. The needle was still sticking out of it.

> "O3T! What came over you?" Alexis chided, whirling on the droid.

> "I was given an order to document life forms. Gungan guide was closest life-form to begin analysis. Objected strongly to blood test."

> "Ow . . . " Jar Jar moaned as Alexis pulled out the needle.

> "I'm sorry. Damn droid. It won't happen again," she assured him, applying pressure to stop the bleeding. A small bruise would probably form, but other than that, he would be fine.

> "What the hell just happened?" demanded Kad, angry at having been woken up.

> "Nothing. Just a bit of morning excitement." Alexis helped Jar Jar to his feet.

> "Uh, my betta get braikfast ready," Jar Jar said, uncomfortable to stay around Kad much longer. Alexis didn't seem to be afraid of Kad, but Jar Jar had a bad feeling about him now. He didn't quite know why.

> "Well whatever it was, it got me up too early. It better not happen again," Kad snapped at Jar Jar and Alexis before striding off.

> "Whoa . . . what was that all about?" Alexis murmured. Jar Jar shrugged.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

> "Damn!" Kad cursed pulling a branch from his clothes. Directly in front of him, Jar Jar tried to ignore him as best as he could. "Why are you making us walk this way? This isn't even a path! We've been walking through this stupid undergrowth for two hours and getting nowhere!"

> "Yous dinna rilly tink dis was gonna be easy, eh? If da Temple nebber been found, how yous 'expect der ta be a path leadin to it?"

> "Don't give me that crap. You said you know where it is, so there must be a path."

> "Isa nevva spaked dat my knew whare it was."

> "Then where are you leading us?!"

> "To da heart o da swamps. Whare it probably tis." Jar Jar was starting to get annoyed by this rude human. He was miffed that Hali had kept Alexis in the back of the expedition with him to converse. He knew it might be an important conversation, but he missed her

company ruefully. Kad was not a pleasant traveling companion at all.

> "How do you reckon it's there?" Kad demanded, his tone changing to that of eagerness.

> Jar Jar was surprised at the change in attitude, but decided not to comment on it. "Cause once my went der. Jus ta explore. Der were lotsa legends bout dat place an my was curious."

> "And what did you find?"

> "Traps. Already sprung traps, an dat's da only reason my saw dem. I dinna dare go any further. Der might've been mur."

> Kad stopped in his tracks. Jar Jar kept walking ahead, making his way through the undergrowth. "Whoa, wait just a minute, this place is supposed to be booby trapped? What kind of traps?" Kad asked, hurrying forward to keep up with Jar Jar.

> "Um . . . nets . . . spears . . . an skulls. Dat's all my remember about what mesa saw," Jar Jar said, after a moment's recollection.

> Kad looked uneasy. "Skulls?" he muttered, now trudging less enthusiastically after Jar Jar.

> <div class="center"><h3>To Be Continued . . . </h3>

2. Quest: The Strong

Quest

part 2

The Strong

> "So, exactly why is it important that we find this Temple, Hali? You've never really explained it to us," said Li. The cook and healer of the team tugged on the kaadu bridle, urging the animal on as it reluctantly plodded on. The kaadus carrying the equipment were getting tired and more sluggish as they continued through the shrubbery. They were slowing the procession down. Hali was worried that Jar Jar and Kad may get too far ahead and was about to call them back when Li's question caught him off-guard.

> "The Temple of Keyla will solve some answers that the Naboo and Gungan civilizations are seeking. There have been numerous conflicts between the human and Gungan race as to whether one or the other colonized this planet first."

> "Why does it matter?"

> "It would help either side immensely to gain more territory if they have natural ties to the land."

> "And the monarchy of Theed? They're such peaceful people. Why would they want to expand? Or the Gungans?"

> "It's not that they'll expand much. Just maybe a little to show either side who's boss. The two races have fought before. Then treaties were signed and now they simply live in distaste of each other. This debate over whether Gungans or Naboo are natives seems to be a new fad among the rulers of both races."

> "Then why are we involved in this? Will finding the Temple really solve all this?"

> "No. It will answer questions. We aren't peacemakers, unfortunately. We're archaeologists."

> "So if anything, the information we find in the Temple will probably start a conflict?" asked Alexis.

> "Possibly."

> "So what good are we doing?" wondered Li.

> "I'm not looking for the Temple simply because of this conflict. There's another reason."

> Alexis and Li nearly stumbled over a blumbush shrub, intent as they were upon Hali's words.

> "The race that originated in the Temple of Keyla has vanished. Without a trace. Of all the different races of Gungans, it is this one that Gungans today are proud to trace their ancestral lines to. The Keyla Gungans stood above all others in the skills of combat, knowledge of medicine, and crafting of precious metals and outstanding weaponry. They were the first to give technology to the race of Gungans - their own technology. It's different from the Naboo's. It allows them to live without affecting their environment harmfully, and in a complex ecosystem like this, that is truly an achievement. It's a fact that because of this technology combined with conservative skills and mindset of the Gungan race, that no species has ever been brought to extinction by them. I want to learn what happened to make their city fall apart. And where they went afterwards."

> "Well, now that's a worthy cause, I think," stated Li. "I like it much better than simply trying to find out who was here first and all that ridiculous fiddle-faddle."

> "I wonder if things will improve between Gungans and humans on this planet. Jar Jar and I seem to get along just fine," wondered Alexis.

> "The Naboo, I think, show a different attitude toward Gungans than you do, Alexis. Did you notice how he was treated at the spaceport?"

> "I remember. He looked so miserable, the poor dear," murmured Li. "Come on, now," she urged the lagging kaadu. "Mik! Give him a push, please."

> "Allright, Li," the young man consented and putting his hands on the kaadu's flank, pressed the animal forward until it began walking a bit faster. Now they were making better progress. The shrubbery was getting thinner and forming into grassland. It was easier to walk through this than through scratchy undergrowth.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>
> "Ow." Alexis carefully dipped her hands in the water, letting the coolness soothe her scratched hands. It had been a most unpleasant hike. The sun was directly overhead and burning down. Foilage was going to be scarce now that they were venturing into the swamp area. Dead trees stood like twisted shadows out of the pale grass-covered ground - if it was indeed solid ground at all. Alexis wiped the sweat off her forehead. Luckily, they had come across this waterfall. Jar Jar had warned them that it would be a hot journey and that they would be needing to refill the waterbags.

> Jar Jar crouched beside her and handed her a container full of a good-smelling substance. "Here, put dis stuff on yous. Itsa hep wit da sunburn."

> "Thanks. What is it?"

> "Woosha plant an mud."

> "Excuse me . . . mud?"

> "Uh huh."

> "Mud?" Alexis repeated, now holding the container at arm's length.

> "Yes . . . mud. It ken be wash-ed off. Trust my, yousa gonna need it ta keep da midges an fly-tings away."

> "Okay . . . here goes."

> Alexis started to apply the mixture to her arms and face. She caught a glimpse of Jar Jar trying not to smile. It was all she could

do to avoid looking at her reflection. She did not want to know what she looked like. "Hey, if this is some sort of joke, I'm gonna use your haillu for polishing rags!" she warned, wagging a finger in his face. Jar Jar raised his hands in innocence.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

> "Come on, dammit, work," Kad cursed softly. The electronic device in his hands - the same one which he had told Jar Jar was a chemical-tracer - was refusing to send through his message. Either that or the communicator on his boss' end of the line was malfunctioning. Finally, after a few frantic minutes, the connection was established.

> "Senator Rast? It's me, Kad Syres."

> "How is your progress?"

> "Slow. We have ourselves one hell of an idiot for a guide. Barely even knows what he's doing."

> "Still blaming other unfortunate life-forms for your own short-comings, I see. None of the equipmen I sent you with is helping?"

> "No . . . it is. I haven't come up with a definite fix on the location yet, but--"

> "Don't give me that crap again, Syres. The technology you have now could find the Temple in seconds. I should have sent some one more experienced, I guess."

> "No," Kad whispered frantically into the communicator. "I-I can do it just fine. I know I can find this place, and when I do--"

> "Shut up. Tell me about the guide. If he's so stupid, why did Jonareh hire him?"

> "Out of pity, is my guess. He says he's seen traps--"

> "He's been there." It was more of a statement than a question.

> Kad almost asked Rast how he was sure, but bit his tongue, avoiding making a costly mistake.

> "I suggest you follow him."

> "What if he's just leading us in one big circle?"

> "Then he's smarter than you," was the icy reply.

> Kad managed to twist his mouth into an appeasing smile. "I guess I'll just have to 'persuade' him to tell me the truth then."

> Rast's eyes narrowed. "Do nothing rash. Not yet. If the guide's fooling you, let Jonareh deal with him. The important thing is the Dnomai. That energy stone is where your salary is coming from so I advise you strongly not to slip up, Syres." There was a flash and the screen went blank. Rast had cut the connection.

>

* * *

> "Lexi?"

> "Yeah, Jar Jar?" Alexis answered, drowsily. She was tired and wanted to just lay down in the sun and bask for a while, like a big lizard. Still, a nagging little voice inside her head urged her on, telling her that they might find the Temple at any moment.

> "Yousa thinkin dis expedition not fun anymores, huh?"

> "What makes you think that?"

> "Yousa look mur bored den O3T. Dat droid has nothin ta talk about now dat wesa in grassylands."

> "Thank the powers that be," Alexis murmured. She'd been so tired that she hadn't noticed how blessedly silent O3T had been for the past couple hours.

> "Exactly whysa yous searchin for dis place? My nevva asked."

> "We want to find out what happened to the Keyla Gungans. Why they left such a beautiful city."

> Jar Jar shook his head sadly. "Den dis trip wasn' necessary. My couda told yous dat."

> Alexis stopped in her tracks suddenly wide awake. Jar Jar walked on ahead then turned to look back at her.

> "You know what happened?" she asked.

> "Yes. Well, not ex-actly, no. Itsa legend my heard when mesa was a little gungan."

> "So what happened?" Alexis hurried to catch up with Jar Jar as he continued walking.

> "My be tellin yous. But itsa notta happy story."

> <div class="center">Jar Jar's Tale

>
 _There was a time the Keyla were thought of as the most beautiful gungan race on Naboo. They were not envied by other gungan races. Rather, they were revered as the direct descendants of the Gods. They built marvelous cities, most remarkably the city of Reiadmoss within the swamps of Keyla.
>
 Skilled artisans, beautiful women, healthy children, and magnificent warriors filled the halls and streets of Reiadmoss. There was no poverty, no violence or crime, and no war. The only reason Reiadmoss had any warriors at all was to protect them from Vermonks or outside enemies, should they make any.
>
 And there was one enemy. One enemy of the whole race that snuck in undetected and unchallenged. It was called Pride. Some say that a demon had unleashed Pride upon the Keyla race, but others argue, saying that the warrior's eyes were as sharp as their spears and that they would have seen any demon that dared approach their city. Pride had come alone and without any help. Ever so slowly, as slowly as the city had been built - brick upon brick - Pride began to pick apart the bonds between the Keyla.
>
 Women became petty and vain, abandoning their children in pursuit of lost youth and beauty. Warriors that had once been part of a blood-strong brotherhood, now boasted about who was the greatest. Rulers tried to outdo the ones before them, rather than concentrate on keeping order. Even children ganged up on the weak whom they had once helped protect from the preying forces of nature.
>
 It all began to spiral out of control. Now there were killings. In anger, one man would strike down his own son. In jealousy, a woman would poison her own daughter. Brother fought against brother, and sister fought against sister. The priests who had once prayed so peacefully now conducted horrific sacrifices of weak children or the old and frail. Anyone not beautiful did not belong to them. Anyone not perfect was born to be sacrificed to the Gods to redeem the Keyla race.
>
 When all the work of the artisans - who had fled long ago - was stained with blood and when all the sun shined on was daily warfare, the Gods regrettably realized what they had to do. They had to stop Pride's madness the only way they could.
>
 Plague filtered in through the strong walls of Reiadmoss, killing all. The beautiful, the weak, and the strong fell without discrimination. Those with any wits still about them fled the city. The others, still consumed with the fever of Pride, stayed behind with their wealth and possessions even as their children died before them. Finally, when the plague had passed, whoever had managed to survive it while staying within the city killed each other over the loot.

>
 Those that fled were turned away from all Gungan cities for the story of their disgraceful corruption had traveled ahead faster than they could run. Diseheartened, they became nomads, traveling the planet's surface for a place to belong. No-one, to this day knows what became of the ones left of the Keyla race. Gungans are still proud to trace their lines back to the Keyla, even though the Keyla became corrupted by that very same pride. Their race was a beautiful one and it is sorely missed. The Keyla are no longer as scorned as they once were. We remember them for the memory of what they used to be._

>

* * *

> "Da Temple tis de only ting left standin since da rest o Reiadmoss sunk into da swamp. Many tried ta find it an all failed maxi-bad. Tis a cursed place now, even though 'twas once sacred to da Guds. Tis believed dat anyting dat enters will nevva return or dat whoever enters an returns will bring da plague that killed out da Keyla. Dere are so-many beliefs of wat dat place tis naow . . . my go wan forevva."

> Alexis was shivering despite the sun. "If it's such a horrible place, why are you coming in with us?"

> "My banish-ed. Who my gonna bring da plague back to?" Jar Jar attempted to joke. Alexis knew better.

> "Jar Jar. I'm serious. Do you feel that there's going to be danger?"

> "Tis jus a legend."

> "You believe in it."

> "My seen da traps. Dat's de only danger wesa gotta worry about."

> "Aren't you the least bit afraid of the curse?"

> "Yes. My is. But my promis-ed not ta leave yous."

> Alexis wasn't satisfied. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

> "Den let me do wat I promis-ed," Jar Jar stated simply. Alexis knew then that she had lost whatever ghost of an argument they had just had. She sighed and linked her arm with his.

> "Why do you men always have to be so stubborn?" She teased.

> Jar Jar could only grin in response.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

> As Mik, Don, and Li unpacked the tents for the night, Jar Jar went over how far they had to travel still.

> "Der's only a few mur miles dat we ken cover tamorrow. Den it get's tricky."

> "Those traps you were talking about?" asked Hali.

> Jar Jar nodded. "Der's no way my ken spring dem all cause my not sur whare ta looksee. Unless . . . wesa send somebotty ahead to cut a clear path."

> "Did they look deadly?"

> "Not rilly. Da skulls my saw belonged ta animals. Dey wer too small ta-"

> "Hold up, wait. The skulls just belonged to animals?" Kad interrupted rudely.

>
 Ignoring him, Hali motioned for Jar Jar to continue.

>
 "Dey wer too small ta survive the clamp-traps. Got crushed."

>
 "How recently were you there?"

>
 "Say bout . . . five-so years."

>
 Kad lost it. "Five years ago? We might as well just turn around now. It's probably on the black market by now --"
>
 Too late, Kad realized his mistake. Hali's eyes narrowed.
"What's on the black market?"
>
 Kad remained silent. He glowered at Jar Jar, blaming the gungan for making his tongue slip.
>
 "Answer me Kad. What are you after?"
>
 "It doesn't matter. I'll find it myself." Hali grabbed a hold of Kad's arm. Kad yanked it away and broke out into a run. Hali took after him and lunged, grabbing the younger man's legs and bringing him down to earth. Kad struggled frantically to get away. "Tell me!" Hali demanded. "What are you really after?"
>
 "Hali!" Jar Jar yelled above Kad's cursing. "Yous don need ta ask his. My kno what he's afta."
>
 "Shut up, gungan!" The young man spat at him.
>
 Jar Jar flinched. Even pinned down by Hali, Kad had a wild look in his eyes that made Jar Jar afraid. He looked like he wanted to tear the gungan limb from limb. It reminded him of Boss Nass' expression after he'd been fished out of Paonga dripping wet, his mansion ruined thanks to Jar Jar. Except Nass had, at first, wanted Jar Jar to be pounded to death. Kad looked like he wanted to do far worse and he probably would try after he heard what Jar Jar had to say next.
>
 "Yur afta the _Dnomai_. Da stone dat the Keyla used ta make der technology work. Itsa worth a lot mur den yous kno . . ."
>
 "I know how much it's worth," growled Kad.
>
 "If it was real, yousa woud be as rich as a Gud."
>
 It took a moment for the words to sink in. "What?!" Kad demanded. "You liar!" He struggled even harder to escape than before. Jar Jar stepped back a few paces.
>
 "It's real and I'm going to find it! Let go!" Kad kicked Hali in the stomach, throwing him off. He rolled to his feet and ran into the darkness. Li, Mik, and Don watched, stunned.
>
 Hali cursed softly, holding his abdomen in pain. Jar Jar and Alexis helped him up. "We're going to have to set a guard up. Most likely he'll come back for his equipment."
>
 Or for someone who knows more than he does, Alexis thought, glancing at Jar Jar. The look he returned mirrored her concern.

>

* * *

> "Damn them. Damn him. It's real, I know it's real. Senators don't blow this kinda money on wild-goose chases. 'Maybe he's smarter than you are,' ha!" Kad said, mimicking Rast. Rast . . . money . . . the equipment . . . How was he going to get it back? Hali would probably set up a night-watch. Kad would find a way. He had to find the _Dmonai_. Rast would break him in half if he returned empty-handed. The Senator had enough power to bury Kad alive and not recieve so much as a smudge on his records. There would be no escape - he was in far too deep this time. "If I don't find it then I'd better kill myself and save him the trouble," Kad muttered, heading back in the direction of the camp. He didn't know what to do or how he was going to do it, but he knew he had to try if only to save his own skin.
>
 It's ironic, somehow, to think that Kad might've found a way to steal back his equipment and leave again undetected. Because the next step he took impaled him on a spear. Kad clutched the shaft of the

spear, blood making his hands warm. It had passed through him like a ghost. He'd barely even felt it enter, but now it hurt so horribly he couldn't even scream. He let out a strangled gasp and fell backwards in a pitiful heap. He was dead as soon as he hit the ground.

>
 A pair of hands loosened his grip on the spear-shaft and pulled it from his body. Kad's killer stood over him, eyes shining in the clouded moonlight. ((Little creatures such as this one shouldn't stray far from the herd,)) the creature spoke in his native tongue. A second figure joined the first.

>
 ((Too bad. If he hadn't whined so much, he might've made it farther.))

>
 ((He was weak, Kojo. And weakness is a sign of disfavor with the Gods. We'll leave him as a warning for the rest of his herd to see. But first, there's someone we must take a closer look at.))

>

* * *

> Alexis heard Li and Mik conversing at the south end of the camp perimeter. In three hours, it would be their turn to sleep while she and Jar Jar took second watch. Jar Jar was sleeping lightly already. Alexis listened to his purring snore and wondered how he found the nerve to close his eyes after what had just happened.

> She also envied him.

> Alexis laid down with her back to Jar Jar and tried to think of other things. She needed three hours now or else, she'd be awake for six hours until her shift was over for the night. She was scared and she didn't doubt that Jar Jar was frightened. Although she knew Li and Mik were on guard, it was still difficult to close her eyes. When sleep did come, finally, it came heavily.

> Two figures crouched next to them, hardly disturbing the mist. One, ever so lightly, pulled back the blanket covering Jar Jar. The gungan felt nothing and continued to sleep.

> ((He isn't strong either. I can sense his fear as he sleeps.)) Kojo whispered.

> ((Don't judge by appearance. You know as little of him as I do. I sense fear, but strength too. He came this far,)) answered his companion.

> ((I think his fear will make him weak in the end. It has for so many others. Why is this one any different?))

> ((Maybe he's not. But he could be. Let's go. Tomorrow we will see how far his strength can endure.))

> Jar Jar stirred and opened his eyes, thinking he heard voices. He sat up looking about, trying to brace himself against the chills of anxiety that shook his body. There was nothing bigger than a blade of swamp grass within five feet of him, but the mist on the ground was swirling crazily.

> <div class="center"><h3>To Be Continued . . .</h3>

3. Quest: Dissuasion

Quest

part 3

Dissuasion

> Death. Pain. Tears. Go back . . . go back, child. To run is to live, to flee is to thrive. Don't go any further. You have brought them far enough. They will die. You can live. Go. A windless voice screamed these words in his head and Jar Jar moaned softly, his body trying to twist away from tearing, seeking claws. There was no escape. A hand closed around his throat, forcing him to gasp for air. He looked up. A corpse bent over him, hands locked around his throat, and rotted face distorting and twisting while the world spun in circles.

>
 With a cry of terror, Jar Jar struggled even harder than before to get away from the dream. Hands were on him and cool water suddenly broke through the heat of fear. His eyes snapped open and met Alexis' blue-grey irises.

>
 Wordlessly, she held him and whispered to him soothingly until his trembling had subsided. It wasn't the first time he'd been having these nightmares. They had started ever since Kad's running off three days ago. He hadn't come back to claim or steal equipment. Hali wondered, but was accepting of the possibility that Kad had decided the _Dmonai_ wasn't worth the trouble after all. Jar Jar had not been sorry to see him go, except for the nightmares that had taken Kad's place at the core of the Gungan's fears.

>
 "You allright?" Alexis asked, after the Gungan had shakily taken a few sips from the canteen.

>
 "Fine. Bad dreamin, dat's all."

>
 "Do you want to talk about it?" Her hand was on his arm. She was so compassionate. Jar Jar couldn't bear to think how danger ahead might result in her death. _ Go back, please, _ he almost begged her.

>
 "No," he said, determined not to be afraid. Maybe his dreams weren't omens. Maybe he was just being a coward. He managed a grin. "Member wat my spake about dat ova-active imaginay-tion? Dat's all 'tis."

>
 "If you're sure of it, then I am. I'll be right beside you, Jar Jar. No worries." Alexis laid down on her side and pulled her blanket up to her shoulders. O3T, off in the distance, stated that it was three hours until sunrise and that all was well. From underneath the blanket, Alexis told O3T, rather primly, that it could be three hours to kaadu-mating season for all she cared and to shut the hell up. Jar Jar couldn't help a fond smile.

>
 "No worries, Lexi, sur."

>
 It was a long time before Jar Jar could sleep again, and while he waited, it was all he could do to keep from worrying.

>

* * *

> "Wesa here."

> Jar Jar surveyed the foilage-shaded path before them. It was almost dusk and now they stood before the border to the heart of the Keyla swamps. As he remembered, he saw the bleached skulls of small animals littered amidst nests of vines. The sinking sun's rays lit upon the rusted and gleaming portions of ancient spears of Gungan warfare.

> He swallowed uneasily. Whoever had set these traps had not been vying to catch small animals. They'd been trying to kill intruders. The bones were only here as warning, not because the area was neglected. He wondered what unsprung traps waited ahead.

> "Well . . . are we going?" asked Alexis, gently.

> "Yes . . . jus, ah , gimme a minute. Yousa all gotta kno da danger dat lay ahead o' us. Any false steps an . . ." Jar Jar drew a line across his neck to make a point.

> "What was your suggestion about sending somebody ahead to cut a clear path?" mused Hali.

> "No no. Notta goot idea. Dat sombotty die, mebbe."

> "Who says it has to be somebody?" Alexis nodded towards O3T who was busy rattling off the scientific names for surrounding plant forms. Everyone else looked at O3T. O3T stopped right in the middle of analyzing a blumbush and stared at everyone else.
>
 "I think we've just found a good reason for bringing you along," Alexis informed the droid.
>

* * *

> O3T gave a nervous whistle as he started wheeling forward. Ten paces behind him followed Jar Jar, Alexis, Hali, and Mik. They had left the kaadus and camping equipment with Li and Don. The kaadus would've been impossible to take along since they were carrying so much. With all the possible traps and sinkholes ahead, it was almost certain one of them would be injured or killed.

> Hali, Alexis and Mik carried some necessary field equipment which wasn't too heavy since they knew they needed to travel lightly through such dangerous grounds. Jar Jar carried a few things as well and mainly kept his attention on the droid, looking for anything it's wheels might uncover as it brushed aside leaves and twigs.

> As the hours passed, O3T sprung leg-clamps with wicked-looking metal teeth that otherwise might've been unseen. Once the droid fell into a pit and they had to pull it out, all the while listening to its wheedling and frantic beeps when its hold on the rope began to slip. Jar Jar had peered down into the pit and had been horrified to report the sight of pikes lining the bottom and sides of the pit wall. If O3T had been a person instead of a droid, the act of pulling him up would've torn him to ribbons. To prove a point, even though it was metal, there were deep gouges in O3T's coverpaint.

> "Oh great, he'll never let us hear the end of this," muttered Lexi, trying to lighten the mood. One look into her eyes and Jar Jar could tell she was as nervous as he was.

> As they pressed on through the swamps, Jar Jar's eyes darted from treetop to treetop and from sky to concealing shrubbery. His eyes never stayed in one place. It seemed that he was looking not only for traps, but for unseen attackers.

> Alexis could feel the tension rising like heat from the Gungan's body. She moved up beside him and linked her arm with his in her usual gesture of comradeship. His golden eyes flickered in her direction and her heart constricted when she saw the extent of his fear. It was fear that she saw, but not for himself alone.

> Alexis didn't know how she knew, but at that very odd moment, she had no doubt that Jar Jar valued her life as much or possibly more than his own. No-one had ever looked at her like that before in all her life; not her father - not any man she had ever known except perhaps her mother, although she couldn't remember.

> She opened her mouth to say something - anything - to relieve the haunting fright in his eyes, when suddenly, his fears were proven to be well accounted for.

> O3T screamed an alarm before he was knocked out of the way like a twig by the giant rotting log that looked was strung on thick rope. Swinging toward them like the pendulum of a doomsday clock, the

juggernaut was jagged at the approaching end and had once been the trunk of a zaela tree as thick as one of the palace towers in Theed.

> Jar Jar flung Hali and Alexis to the ground and lay flat between them, his arm over Alexis to ensure that she would keep down. Behind them, Mik cursed and also flung himself to the ground. The log passed over them, the ropes audibly straining with the weight of holding up the swinging obstacle. Beside her, Alexis heard Jar Jar whimper and then scream. The log went as far as the ropes would allow it to go, then began to swing back.

> As soon as it had completely passed over their heads, Hali grabbed his blaster and aimed for the ropes. The third and fourth shot cut through their marks and the log went sailing backwards with the momentum of its swing, crashing through ferns, zaela saplings, and undergrowth, stirring up small animals which raced away panicked disorder, shrieking in alarm.

> Jar Jar grit his teeth and brought his legs underneath him. Alexis saw his arm - the same one thrown over her shoulders to shield her - bloodied and embedded with splintered wood. The log's jagged end had gotten him pretty badly. Alexis wanted to cry, but instead she reached for Jar Jar's arm to see what she could do. Mik came up beside her with a medical kit.

> "He'll be alright, as soon as we get him cleaned up. No bones appear to be broken, but there's a chance he may have dislocated his shoulder." Mik pulled the fabric away from the Gungan's shoulder and gently touched it. Jar Jar made no sound of pain. He applied more pressure, and felt around, searching for any signs of dislocation or fracture. "Well, it appears he's alright, except for his arm. Now for these splinters. It's going to take some time getting the smaller ones out - they're imbedded completely."

> Jar Jar squeezed his eyes shut as they set to work. Alexis reached out and gave his haillu a stroke. "It'll be okay," she assured him.

> "No." Jar Jar shook his head, looking almost angry. "Yousa coulda been dead. My shoudn' have taken yousa here. Wat if da Temple doesn' exist? Wesa all dyin for nuttin."

> Alexis blinked, surprised.

> "An my not leavin dis swamp without all o yous bahind mesa. Les go back."

> "No," Hali's voice rang out.

> "But-" Jar Jar started.

> "No," Hali repeated, his voice edged with steel. "We are going ahead. With or without you. But we are not going back without that technology. Kad was after something there. Something that we can take back with us and if its the source of the Keyla's technology, perhaps it can benefit polluted worlds. He called it the Dmonai."

>
 "De only ting dat is out der is death an blood. Dis 'Damoni' ting, tis worth dyin for? Tis worth Lexi o Mik o mesa dyin for?" Jar Jar argued.

>
 Hali sighed. "It is there choice as always, if they want to follow me into this danger, just like it was your choice. Did you make the wrong decision, Jar Jar? If you did, then turn back. But don't ask me to follow you away from something that could save lives and change the world for better."

>
 Jar Jar shook his head. "Yousa havin a noble raison, but dat raison sur not gonna jus-tafy wat's gonna happin ta us or yousan if wesa keep walkin on into dese traps. Mebbe nex time, wesa nut gonna be so lucky."

>
 "I'm well aware of the risks. It's getting dark. We'll continue

on after your wounds are treated, then break camp. Is that alright with everyone?" Hali asked, looking meaningfully at Jar Jar. The Gungan sighed, but made no protest and wallowed silently in misery as Alexis and Mik worked on his arm. "I'm going to see if I can find O3T. He's probably either shut down or most predictably, wheeling out of this place as fast as he can go. I'll be back in less than a half-hour. I won't go far." Hali strode off and was lost to sight in the shadows.

>

* * *

> "Ten minutes until morning. Ten minutes until sunset. Ten minutes until three seconds until five hours until six days until seven weeks--"

> "Shut down."

> O3T rattled and then obeyed Hali's order. Hali sighed. "I don't think he's going to be of much use to us any longer. The blow severely disrupted his rational configuration. All his wiring is completely shot to hell. We may have to leave him here."

> Alexis rested her head on her knees as she looked over O3T's dented, mud-covered form. "I never in a million years thought I'd be saying this, but I feel sorry for the annoying little booger."

> "Mesa too. If wesa leave his out heres, hesa mebbe get stolen or crunched or sometin."

> "Well, if you want to carry him till we get to the Temple, that's okay with me." said Mik, returning with fresh water. He handed one of the canteens to Alexis who took a sip, then passed it to Jar Jar.

> "On secon thot, no. Mebbe hesa betta off heresa. I wonda how wesa gonna get past all da traps."

> "We'll just have to be extra careful," said Hali. "Are you sure you're going to stay with us, Jar Jar?"

> "Yes. My sowwy about bafore--" Jar Jar began. Hali held up a hand.

> "Don't aplogize. It's alright. I appreciate your concern for us. We should continue on now. Let's get a few more hours of travel done while there is still some light in the sky."

> They gathered up their gear and set off, walking further on into the dregs of the swamp. O3T's figure leaned forlorn and inanimate against a zaela tree, growing smaller and smaller in the distance until it was out of sight completely. Mist swirled around their feet, hiding any signs of their passage, and any signs of hidden traps. Jar Jar did not like it one bit. Now they were trusting fate alone to guide their steps.

> "Lexi . . . mesa not liken dis, one bit."

> "Neither do I," she confided. "But we've come this far. Maybe we'll make it through this just fine."

> There was a whirl of ropes and rustling in the leafy branches overhead. Hali and the others looked up sharply as a dark something descended fast upon them. It stopped with a jerk as the rope reached its limit. Alexis shuddered in revulsion as her lantern light swept across the bloated features of Kad's corpse. Kad swung to and fro as if in a light breeze. Mik swallowed, then staggered away, sick. Jar Jar turned away, refusing to look at the bloody thing hanging by its feet just ten inches away from him. He saw Alexis' shoulders beginning to shake and went over to her. She choked back a sob and buried her face in his chest.

> "Shh, Lexi . . . " Unsure what to do, Jar Jar gave her a hug. His body was stiff with fear and he looked off into the distance behind them.It could have been her. She could have walked into that trap and she could be dead and swinging there right now. Gods . . . what if . . .
>
 With a calmness he did not know he possessed, Hali reached out and stopped the corpse from swinging.
>

To Be Continued . . .

4. Quest: Reiadmoss

The Quest : Reiadmoss

>
 They had buried Kad a few hours earlier. The mound of dirt still spread evenly over his grave. No-one, however, could get the image of his rotted face out of their minds.
>
 In the eerie silence of the swamp, Alexis found herself wishing sorely for Kad's complaining or O3T's droning on about the organic life forms that live in tree bark. She leaned her head against Jar Jar's shoulder. The Gungan had fallen into a shaky sleep that fortunately - and amazingly - held no nightmares for him. She didn't want to wake him just yet, although they all felt to be in considerable danger.
>
 Hali and Mik talked in low voices at the edge of the camp perimeter, each with a gun in hand.
>
 The campfire was a heap of smoldering coals - the best they could coax out of the fog-dampened wood of their surroundings. It gave off more smoke than warmth or light. Lying against Jar Jar with her eyes closed, Alexis wondered why they even needed it.
>
 As if in answer, Hali's boot scuffed dirt over the coals, snuffing the points of red and orange light out. "Wake up," he hissed, between clenched teeth.
>
 Alexis' eyes snapped open and she reluctantly nudged Jar Jar awake. Hali was alert, his whole body stood rigid. Likewise, Mik held a defensive stance and held his weapon at the ready. Jar Jar was on his feet before she was. His smooth hands gently lifted her up by her wrists and he motioned for her to be quiet.
>
 Alexis heard a scuffle behind her. She wheeled around to be met with a fist aimed straight toward her face. She ducked, reflexively, and pivoted on one knee, swinging her leg to knock her attacker's feet from under him. Her leg slashed through air and she felt an arm go around her neck; unmistakably her attacker was about to break it.

>
 "NO!" she heard somebody yell - Jar Jar?! The arm holding her across the neck dropped and she was shoved to the ground. She turned around and looked around wildly. Hali was lying nearby, a streak of blood -black in the wan moonlight - trickling down his forehead. Mik was likewise in a crumpled heap, next to another form. Alexis realized that Mik must have taken out one of his opponents before he fell.
>
 Jar Jar and another dark form were locked in combat. Jar Jar was losing quite badly, Alexis feared. Sure enough, Jar doubled over as a fist slammed into his stomach and fell to the ground as the dark figure slammed his arms down across Jar Jar's back. He lay less than three feet away from Alexis, moaning as blows continued to rain down on him.

>
 Alexis, angered, reached for Hali's gun. A boot slammed into the back of her head. Colors exploded brightly in the darkness before her eyes and she collapsed over Hali's body.
>
 ((Enough, Kojo. Really, he's been unconscious for the past thirty seconds. Must you carry on?))
>
 Kojo stopped kicking the young Gungan at his feet. ((He was pathetically easy. We ought to kill him and these humans and save ourselves the trouble of carrying them back to Keyla.))
>
 ((Who says we have to take the humans? Let's leave them here. They'll get lost and fall into a trap. It's the Gungan that Doss wants.))
>
 ((Fine. We'll take this sorry excuse for a warrior---))
> ((*Kojo.* Have you been walking too close to the Dmonai?))

> ((No. I have not.)) Kojo replied, sourly.
 ((It sounds like it.)) Raell chortled.
>
 Raell, the older warrior stooped down next to Jar Jar and tied his wrists behind his back tight enough to cease any struggle but not tight enough to cut off circulation. ((Get the kaadu, Kojo.))
>
 Kojo obeyed without defiance and brought over the snorting steed. Raell lifted Jar Jar and draped him over the saddle. Then, Raell mounted and took up the reins. The others that had fought alongside them were already safely traveling ahead in the darkness, save for Talo who had fallen, killed by one of the humans' guns.

>
 ((Hey, what about me?)) Kojo complained.
>
 ((You're young. You walk.)) Raell replied, with a wry grin. Kojo scowled darkly.
>
 ((We should make sure that the humans won't follow us.)) He said, bringing up the age-old argument.
>
 ((Leave the poor fools to their own undoing.)) Raell snapped wearily, and clapped his heels into the kaadu's flanks, urging his steed onward. Across the saddle, Jar Jar moaned softly. Kojo glanced at the younger Gungan in disgust but left him alone as if he was now loathe to touch this weakling . . . this child . . . this . . .

>

* * *

> Alexis was the first to awaken from her concussion. She groaned and spat out the bad taste in her mouth. Hali's chest was rising up and down normally, as was Mik's. Mik opened his eyes next. Alexis did not know he was awake until he crawled over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She shrieked and flailed out, catching him across the face.

> "Owww! jeez! Dammit . . . "

> "Oh, sorry . . . I thought you were --"

> "It's okay. I still can't believe . . . we didn't even hear them!"

> "I know. They were like shadows. Awful . . . hey, I think Hali's seriously hurt. Where's the lantern?"

> "Let me get it."

> Mike returned with the lantern and medical kit.
 While Alexis tended to Hali's wounds, Mik regathered the weapons and then called for Alexis to hurry over.
>
 Lowering Hali's head onto a folded blanket, Alexis loped over dizzily - still not quite recovered from her concussion - and knelt next to the body of one of their attackers. It was a Gungan, physique

exactly like Jar Jar's, but skin color different and wearing armor unlike any Alexis had seen. And it was still breathing.

>
 It muttered something that sounded a lot like cuss words. Mik shoved the gun under its chin and against its throat.

>
 "Don't kill him, Mik. Maybe Jar Jar can tell him that we --" Alexis suddenly turned her head. "Where's Jar Jar?"

>
 Mik did not let his eyes leave the slowly awakening Gungan's face. "They took him . . . probably."

> "Why him and not us?"
 "Because Jar Jar knows what he's doing and we don't, that's why. I bet they're making wagers on which one we're gonna fall into - spike-pit or skull-smasher."

>
 The Gungan's eyes snapped open and he started, realizing what the cold thing against his neck was. Forcing himself to regain his composure, the Gungan glowered into Mik's eyes, defiantly.

>
 "Allright, scumbag. Where did your goons take our guide?"

>
 ((Are you asking me a question?)) the Gungan chortled in his native language. ((Sorry, but I can't understand you. And you can't understand me. Make all the demands you want.))

>
 "What did he say?"

>
 The Gungan laughed derisively, even though he might have suspected that he'd be killed if the two humans had no use for him.

>
 "I believe he said," spoke a voice from behind Alexis and Mik, " 'Are you asking me a question? Sorry, but I can't understand you. And you can't understand--" Alexis spun around. "O3T!!! Thank goodness!" Later, she would deny ever doing this, but caught up in the moment, Alexis hugged the droid. If droids could blush, O3T probably would have turned scarlet. Instead, he continued his translation.

>
 "I thought your circuits were busted. How did you repair yourself?" Alexis asked, after O3T had finished.

>
 "That's not important. O3T, ask him where they took Jar Jar."

>
 O3T turned to the Gungan who still sneered. The sneer changed to a look of shock as O3T asked him the question in his native language. Now it was Mik's turn to be smug.

>
 ((If you think I'm going to tell you--))

>
 ((Pardon me for interrupting,)) interrupted O3T. ((But you are rendered helpless. You cannot fight. You will most likely die if you are left here alone and we will help you if you direct us to the Keyla ruins.))

>
 ((I am one of the Jaern - the New Order of the Keyla. I do not give away secrets to spare my life.))

> ((According to Keyla order - this unit's database specifies that injured soldiers are killed off.))
 ((Yes,)) The Gungan said, grimacing with the pain. ((Weakness is detested among the Jaern. Only the best from each warrior is accepted and death is the only excuse for failure.))

> ((Then the logical thing to do would be to let us help you. Heal and tell us where Reiadmoss is.))

> The injured Gungan gaped. ((You know the city's sacred name? How is that possible?))
 ((Myth and legends are abundant about it. It is well known and feared by the species Gungan.))

> ((Where did you hear the name?))
 ((From the Gungan Jar Jar who was our guide.))

> ((The prisoner . . .))

> O3T gave a soft hoot of surprise and relayed the information to Alexis and Mik.

> "So he didn't leave us . . ." Mik wondered aloud. Alexis glared at

him.
 "How could you ever think he would?"
> Mik shrugged. "He seemed afraid . . . "
 "He's probably terrified. It doesn't matter. You don't have to be macho to be loyal to your friends," Alexis retorted. She couldn't help snapping. She was worried . . . Jar Jar was in this mess because of them.
>
 "Ask him where--"
> "He said they're taking him to 'Reiadmoss'," interrupted Mik.
 "I mean, what they're going to do to him."
> O3T turned to the Gungan and the reply he got was less than welcome.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>
> Jar Jar moaned softly, still slumped over the kaadu's saddle. Kojo gave him a brief glance, then slowed his pace so that he was walking directly beside the Gungan. Raell looked back to check on their prisoner's status as well.

> ((He looks like he could use some water,)) Raell said, handing Kojo a canteen.

> ((I refuse to touch him.))
 ((Fine. I'll do it. Tell me when he wakes up.))
> ((Why are you even thinking of showing him kindness? It will only weaken him further.))

> ((Kojo, have you forgotten the Code of the Jaern?))
 ((But Doss said--))
> ((The Boss no longer believes in it, you're right. But that doesn't mean it should be forgotten among the rest of us. Recite the Code.))

> ((A warrior's blood is as valuable as his companion's. A warrior's blood is as vulnerable as his companion's. A warrior is what he gives to others - not what he demands from others.)) Kojo recited, somewhat sullenly.
 Raell let him dwell on the words he had spoken for a short while.
>
 ((So?)) he then prompted.
>
 Jar Jar opened his eyes and looked about, weakly, not knowing where he was.
>
 Kojo sighed, somewhat irritably and lifted the young Gungan's chin to meet his gaze. Jar Jar gasped as he beheld another Gungan walking along beside him. As his amber eyes met Kojo's blue-silver ones, he swallowed dryly, searching for his voice. He'd gone nearly ten hours without water and was suffering acutely from this type of dehydration.
> "Wheresa am my?" he asked, his ragged voice trembling.

> Kojo sighed. In Reaidmoss, children half this Gungan's age didn't show fear to their opponents. He couldn't understand even what the Gungan was saying. It was speaking in Common of all things. To other Gungans. Didn't it know it's own native tongue?

> ((What is wrong with you? I don't understand why Doss didn't order us to slit your throat instead of drag you along with us.))

> Jar Jar's mouth dropped open in surprise as he heard his native tongue. He recognized it instantly and knew how to speak it - the thing was, nobody in Otah Gunga used it anymore. Common was much less complicated than the intricate Gungan language.

> ((Yes, you recognize your own language? How fascinating. I was beginning to think you were hopeless,)) sneered Kojo. Raell shot him a warning glance that was tinged with sadness.

> ((I sorry. Not used to speaking Gunga.)) Jar Jar said, hesitantly. He knew how to speak it, but he hadn't for so very long.

> ((I can tell,)) retorted Kojo.
 ((Where are you taking me?))
> ((That's none of your concern.))
 ((Yes it is!)) Jar Jar argued. ((I didn't do anything wrong. Why are you treating me like this?))

>
 Kojo dealt Jar Jar a blow to his face. "OOOW!" he cried in pain.

>
 ((Shut up.))

> ((Why'd you do that for??)) Jar Jar yelled, rubbing his cheek with his tied wrists.
 ((Shut up or I'll slit your throat, so help me.))

>
 ((Kojo!)) Raeli stopped the kaadu. ((Lay one more threat or blow to him and I'll tie you across the kaadu and drag you back to Reiadmoss like an infant. Do the words of the Code mean that little to you?))

>
 Kojo looked about to argue, but managed to keep silent. He swiftly moved ahead of the kaadu so he wouldn't have to be any closer to Jar Jar than necessary.

>
 Raeli did not turn around, but he reached back and put a hand on Jar Jar's back. ((Don't worry. The Boss doesn't want you dead. He thinks that you have much potential - if you could only be trained to let go of your fears.))

>
 ((Why would the Boss - whoever he is - be interested in me?))

> ((You have been struck down by the humans - perhaps even by your own kind. What are you doing out in the open? And so far from your home in Otah Gunga?))
 ((I was banished. For my clumsiness.))

> ((For more than that, is my guess. Can you fight?))
 ((No.))

> ((Do you have any skill at all?))
 ((No. I'm useless.))

> ((And clumsy?))
 ((Yes.))

> ((That will change.))

> ((How?)) Jar Jar asked. Instead of answering him, Raeli took out his canteen of water and offered it to Jar Jar who took it graciously with his bound hands and attempted to drink from it upside down - unable to lift his body, tied down as he was. He managed only to lose a quarter of the water in the bottle before hastily handing it back to Raeli. ((I can't do it tied like this.))

> Raeli smiled. ((Do you need help?))
 ((Yes . . . please?))

> ((Good. Very good. You are not afraid to ask for people's help. That is important, if you are to become one of the Jaern,)) Raeli said while he dismounted.

> Jar Jar would have asked what the Jaern was but he was so thirsty that all he could keep his attention on was the water canteen. He ran his tongue over his parched lips and let Raeli lift his head and hold the canteen up to his lips, pouring the cool water down his throat.

> ((Thank you,)) Jar Jar said, feeling much better.
 ((You might as well give him a pat on the head while you're at it,)) came the sour retort from up ahead.

> ((Shut up, Kojo,)) Raeli answered, as he pulled himself up in the saddle. Kojo did not slow down to wait for Raeli. He was about twenty yards ahead while Raeli got the kaadu moving again.

> ((There's nothing special about him,)) Kojo muttered, under his breath, furiously smashing aside branches and vines obstructing his path. ((The Boss was mistaken. There's nothing in him that makes him worth all this trouble.)) For the first time ever, Kojo found himself wishing he had the guts to act on his thoughts.

> <div class="center">To Be Continued . . .

5. Quest: Hope's End

"So what you're saying is that the Keyla are going to kill him if he doesn't pass their standards?" Alexis demanded. Held by the throat, the Gungan frantically tried to remove her hands from choking off his

air supply.

>
 "Alexis . . . I think you should let the guy breathe . . . " said Mik.

>
 "Give me one good reason why . . ."

>
 "Because in order to participate in an interrogation - vocally, that is,, a living being must be able to take in oxygen and exhale without any or little obstruction," answered O3T.

>
 "True." Alexis released the Keyla warrior's throat. He glared at her hotly, now that he was free.

>
 ((Do you doubt your friend's ability? I would. Only the best of warriors get through the Trial alive,)) he hissed. ((And from what I saw of his fighting skills tonight was pathetic. He will not last a minute.))

>
 Alexis clenched her fists and Mik creased his brow in worry as O3T relayed back what the warrior had said.

>
 Alexis snarled something at the warrior in Huttese. Mik raised an eyebrow. O3T gave an squeal of indignation. Never had the droid's translating system felt so befouled in all of its existence . . .

>
 "Watch your mouth, young lady," said Hali, weakly from where he lay.

>
 Mik and Alexis rushed to his side, while the warrior snarled in frustration at his immobilized state. This was a chance to escape but for the pain, he could not even bring himself to crawl on hands and knees away from the humans.

>
 "Are you alright?"

>
 "Nevermind me. It's just a scratch. What's going on? Where's Jar Jar?"

>
 "Greetings, Master Jonareh."

>
 "And who the hell fixed him?"

>
 " 'Glad to see you're alright, O3T', " sniffed the droid in what sounded very much like a wounded tone. "'Oh, you too, Master Jonareh,' " it went on sarcastically.

>
 "They've taken Jar Jar to Reiadmoss." Mik informed Hali. "As our captive has told us."

>
 "Captive?" Hali asked, curiously. Mik inclined his head to the Gungan laying wounded about twenty feet away. "Help me up." Mik and Alexis helped Jonareh to his feet and once he could stand, he walked towards the warrior who glared at him, defiantly.

>
 Hali glared right back.

>
 ((You and I,)) said Hali, crouching down until he was level with the Gungan's face, ((are going to have a little heart-to-heart chat.))

>

* * *

> Jar Jar was miserable. He hurt from the saddle digging into his stomach and the bonds were chafing at his skin. Kojo was still up ahead, walking silently and sullen. Raell would not let him walk, no matter how Jar Jar had begged. He had been riding this way for more hours than he could bring himself to count.

> Raell suddenly reached back and put his hand between Jar Jar's shoulderblades, gently shaking him as if to wake him. ((We're here.)) he said, softly.

> Jar Jar looked up and saw only ruins of an ancient Temple, just as he had expected to see.

> ((Where is everybody?)) Jar Jar asked, perplexed. This didn't look like a city to him.

> ((Quiet.)) Raell cupped his hands around his mouth and gave a long, wistful, trilling. The call of a forgotten race.

> An answer - or maybe an echo - came back to them. ((Come on,)) Raell urged his kaadu. The three Gungans made their way into a corridor of darkness that showed itself between one stone and a pillar - but only if you looked at a certain angle. The creeping mist covered any sign of their passage.

> Hands reached out in the darkness - cold hands. They gripped Jar Jar and although he struggled, held him tight. His bonds were cut and he fell to the ground and cried out as cramps seized his body.

> Roughly he was lifted to his feet and held with his back to a wall. Without warning, either sand or dirt - Jar Jar couldn't tell - was thrown into his frightened eyes. Jar Jar struggled, even as his eyes streamed tears from the stinging particles in his eyes.

> He was walked through the dark corridor and it wasn't until the unmistakable heat of a lit torch hit his skin that he realized he was blind.

> Frantically, he reached up to rub whatever the substance was out of his eyes. A hand grabbed his wrist and forced it down. A voice whispered in his haillu - Raell. ((Don't. It will only make it hurt worse. It's only temporary, don't worry.))

> The grip on his wrist loosened when he obediently let his arm relax. Jar Jar had sometimes wondered how people without eyes felt about blindness. Now he knew and he knew how the darkness - if you weren't used to it all your life- was terrifying beyond words. He managed to force himself not to sob from the fear, but it still showed in his face and in his aimlessly staring eyes.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

>

> ((Sit here,)) the guard said, dragging Jar Jar by his chained wrists into a vast room. If there was any sort of light, Jar Jar thought bitterly, he wouldn't be able to see it. His dream of darkness would last longer than any night. ((The Boss will be here shortly,)) the guard told him and left.

> Jar Jar made no response. The guard cut his bonds and left the room. Jar Jar rubbed his chafed wrists. He did not realize he was no longer alone until a hand clamped down on his shoulder.

> Startled, Jar Jar yelped and struck out, his flailing arm, connecting with something solid. The figure he had struck gave a cry of pain and fell forward. Jar Jar could not see, but he had never wanted to find an exit so badly in his life. He stumbled toward what he thought was a door and instead collided with another figure which shoved him roughly to the ground and kicked him hard in the ribs. Jar Jar gasped and curled up, defensively, waiting for more blows. They never came.

> ((You're as strong as I had hoped,)) spoke a cold voice. Jar Jar looked up at the sound, though he couldn't see what he looked at.

> ((Afraid of darkness, are you? It's all part of a game we play here; a test for new warriors. To see if they can find their opponents. I thought I'd test it on you to see your reaction. Impressive. Even blind, you defend yourself. Many others have been known to cower and beg for mercy, using their blindness as their excuse.))

> Jar Jar struggled as he felt cold fingers descend upon his face and for a moment, he was terrified that the fingers were going to gouge out his eyes and make him blind forever. Instead, his eyelids were forced open and something was poured over his irises. Jar Jar whimpered at the sting. He closed his eyes, the left-over liquid

running out in tears.

> When he opened them again, shapes and colors swam blearily, slowly taking form. Somebody reached down -- Jar Jar did not make out that it was a hand until it was two inches from his face. He stiffened in anticipation of another blow.

> The fingers tenderly ran over his bruised cheek, then withdrew. ((Lift him to his feet.)) Jar Jar felt the ground drift back from beneath him and he was now facing a pair of pale blue eyes - as pale and clear as water splashing through the air.

> ((Your name, young one?))

> ((Jar Jar Binks,)) he mumbled thickly, tasting blood.

> ((I am Doss, ruler of the Keyla. You have been taken here to be trained in our ways.))

> ((Why?)) Jar Jar asked. The blue eyes - the only thing his swimming vision could really make out - narrowed. ((I mean, why do you want me?))

> ((Commendable. You are clever - letting us take you here as a prisoner and brave to pretend innocence. You never would have found this place in the company you were traveling with. Why have you come seeking us?))

> ((I haven't come seeking you. The humans . . . they wanted to come here. I'm just their guide.))

> ((There is time for lying, and a time for telling the truth.)) The blue eyes flashed in fury, or so Jar Jar imagined. ((Humans, pah. That's an obvious cover. Why would you even associate with them unless you all had the same goal?))

> ((What's wrong with humans? They've accepted me more than my own people.)) Jar Jar replied, with a hint of bitterness. Doss' eyes regarded him keenly.

> ((Ah, so you are an outcast. We are all outcasts. All of us have come here in pursuit of a second chance. Some of us murdered, some of us stole. Some of us loved the wrong person. And some of us, like yourself, have come shielding their reasons. We are kin; you and all here. If you came to join us, as I hope you are, then we are willing to accept you.))

> Jar Jar closed his eyes in pain. Acceptance . . . he'd craved that for many years, but found that in his case, it was either rare or non-lasting. No matter how he tried to avoid it, something about him always seemed to put an end to whatever friendships he began. Take Alexis and Hali, for example. Look at the trouble they were in now. Did they think he was dead? Most likely they thought he ran off in fear. The very idea of it made Jar Jar cringe.

> The Boss put a hand on Jar Jar's shoulder. ((You are tired, child. Show him to a room where he may rest,)) he told one of the guards.

> Jar Jar went with them quietly, knowing there was nowhere to run if he broke free of their firm hold on his arms.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

> ((I will not help you.))

> Hali sighed, wearily. ((Of course not.))

> ((Like I warned you, you wasted your time. Your friend is probably dead by now.))

> ((You really think they'd drag him there just to kill him?)) The warrior was silent and refused to answer him. Hali nodded, his suspicions affirmed. ((You don't know what's going on, do you? You're just obeying orders.)) Silence.

> "Let him go, Alexis."

> "What?"

> "I said, let him go. He's not going to help us."

> "But--" "Alexis. Would you believe him if he told us

exactly what we wanted to know?"

>
 Alexis realized then that Hali had not given up. He had something up his sleeve. She knelt down and untied the Gungan who got to his feet, glowering at them. Although wounded and weak, the gungan was surprisingly swift and he vanished into the shadows of the swamp, faster than their eyes could determine which direction he had taken.

>
 "So now what? We follow him?" asked Mik. "He'll cover his trail. And there's probably more traps out there."

>
 "Don't worry about the traps." Hali took out a small device from his belt. "Our Gungan friend has a tracing device on him. We're going to follow him as soon as he's gotten a twenty-minute start. If he senses that we're following him, he'll most likely take a harder path. Right now, it seems he's more concerned with getting home to Reaidmoss than making sure we don't find the place."

>
 "And then what?" asked Alexis, getting her gear together. "Do you really think they'll just open the doors and let us in?"

>
 "I'm thinking this up as we go along. If you can think of anything better, speak up now or forever hold your peace."

>
 Alexis grinned and helped Hali to his feet. "It's going to be hell keeping one step ahead of these guys."

>
 "Yep."

>
 "Correction," started O3T, "The warrior is approximately forty-two yards ahead of us. We are currently zero steps ahead."

>
 "Shaddap," muttered Alexis, falling into step behind Hali and Mik.

>

* * *

> ((You, get in there,)) the guard said, giving Jar Jar a push between the shoulderblades. The Gungan stumbled forward and nearly fell, much to the guard's amusement.

> ((You aren't very graceful, are you?))

> ((No. One of the reasons I was banned,)) Jar Jar replied. ((Among others,)) he muttered.

> ((The stone will change all that. You have no fighting skills, and no confidence in yourself, but there is something about you Doss sees . . . he thinks there is something worth paying attention to in you. I can't see it, and it seems you can't either.))

> ((What stone?)) asked Jar Jar. ((The Dmonai? It's not real . . . is it?))

> But the guard had already shut the heavy door, leaving Jar Jar alone with his questions.

> He laid down on the bed, and was surprised to find it more comfortable than he had expected. Perhaps it wasn't as soft as the childhood bed in his memories, but to someone who had been sleeping on the swamp floor a good deal of his life, it felt like lying on a cloud. Jar Jar closed his eyes for a brief moment of relaxation, trying to calm his nerves. He was asleep before he got a chance to re-open them.

> <div class="center">* * *</div>

> "I don't understand this. His signal has stopped moving," Hali said, looking at the tracking device in his hand as he led his weary band forward.

> "You don't think he found it and took it off?" Mik asked.

> "Well, we'll find out soon. The signal is only a quarter of a mile away. Come on."

> The grayish muck of the swamp clung to their legs as they trudged on. Alexis gritted her teeth, hating the feel of the slimy mud seeping into her boots, but she knew she had to keep on walking. Her friend was in trouble; trouble he never would have gotten into if they hadn't asked him to be their guide.

> What was happening to him now? Was he dead? Being tortured? Alexis was so preoccupied with guessing Jar Jar's fate, she almost ran into Mik, who stopped abruptly with a curse.

> Ten meters before them, a Gungan was strung up by its feet, a spear impaled through its neck. It's face was frozen in fear and Alexis had to look away. She shuddered and leaned on O3T for support as her knees threatened to give way.

> Was this Jar Jar's fate?

> "Oh fuck," Hali muttered. When Alexis brushed the tears clouding her vision, she saw what Hali had cussed about. A spear tip poked her gingerly in the throat and was accompanied by a gruff command. She had time to see Hali and Mik being tied and bound by two soldiers each before a sack was shoved over her head. She struggled by instinct, frightened by Hali's muffled yelling, Mik's sudden cry of pain, and O3T 's indignant beeping. Something hard slammed down on the back of her head and she knew nothing more but darkness.

> <div class="center">To Be Continued . . .

>

> <div>

End
file.